



Early Journal Content on JSTOR, Free to Anyone in the World

This article is one of nearly 500,000 scholarly works digitized and made freely available to everyone in the world by JSTOR.

Known as the Early Journal Content, this set of works include research articles, news, letters, and other writings published in more than 200 of the oldest leading academic journals. The works date from the mid-seventeenth to the early twentieth centuries.

We encourage people to read and share the Early Journal Content openly and to tell others that this resource exists. People may post this content online or redistribute in any way for non-commercial purposes.

Read more about Early Journal Content at <http://about.jstor.org/participate-jstor/individuals/early-journal-content>.

JSTOR is a digital library of academic journals, books, and primary source objects. JSTOR helps people discover, use, and build upon a wide range of content through a powerful research and teaching platform, and preserves this content for future generations. JSTOR is part of ITHAKA, a not-for-profit organization that also includes Ithaka S+R and Portico. For more information about JSTOR, please contact support@jstor.org.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES.

BY W. G. BALLANTINE.

OLIVER WENDELL HOLMES was the most "clubable" man that ever lived in New England. He was the incarnation of social communicative geniality. The "Saturday Club," which used to meet at Parker's, and which included Emerson, Hawthorne, Longfellow, Lowell, Motley, Agassiz and others, was the most brilliant company of men of letters that ever forgathered about an American table, and Holmes was, confessedly, the most brilliant talker of them all. His literary work is all self-revelation to a social circle. His prose is confidential talk to a group. His poems are rainbows that flash across the spray of talk. His self-chosen title, "Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table," has never had another claimant.

Conversation differs from lecturing just in the personal element. It is the incidental revelation of personality. Therein lies its charm. Dr. Holmes said, in the "Poet at the Breakfast-Table": "I shall say many things which an uncharitable reader might find fault with as personal. I should not dare to call myself a poet if I did not, for if there is anything that gives one a title to that name it is that his inner nature is naked and is not ashamed." The same principle holds for the conversationalist. For as Dr. Holmes said again: "One cannot gather some of the best fruits of life without climbing out to the ends of the slender branches of the Ego. What have we better worth telling than our impressions of the great show at which we have been looking ever so many years?" This last sentence well describes his writings. They are the record of his impressions at the great show of life. "*Liberavi animam meam,*" he said, which may be freely rendered, "I have made a clean breast of everything." Certain it is that we have never been taken into the innermost

confidence of any of our literary men as into that of Oliver Wendell Holmes. And that is the reason why many of us feel for him an intensity of personal attachment we feel for no other. When Emerson and Lowell and the rest have taken their hats and gone home we wheel our chairs up before the fender and talk the day over with Holmes.

Egotism in general is offensive because the ordinary kind is grounded in self-ignorance. The candor of one who confidentially discloses the truth of his inner life is something far different. It is the highest compliment that mind pays to mind. Scientific perspicacity and moral courage unite in it. He who talks truly of himself becomes, *ipso facto*, objective and impersonal and may justly affirm, "This I say of me but think of you, Love." It must be stipulated, of course, that the candor shall be that of a noble, modest, normal soul. The naked shamelessness of old reeling Silenus and his Bacchanalian ruck belongs in another category.

Holmes early discovered the representative quality of his own egotism. He said:

"I have told my story. I do not know what special gifts have been granted or denied me; but this I know: that I am like so many others of my fellow creatures, that when I smile I feel as if they must; when I cry I think their eyes fill; and it always seems to me that when I am most truly myself I come nearest to them and am surest of being listened to by the brothers and sisters of the larger family into which I was born so long ago. I have often feared that they might be tired of me and what I tell them. But then, perhaps, would come a letter from some quiet body in some out-of-the-way place, which showed me that I had said something which another had felt but never said, or told the secret of another heart in unburdening my own."

So, still at the age of seventy-seven, writing the trivial happenings of his hundred days in Europe, he could say:

"I have daily assurances that I have a constituency of known and unknown personal friends whose indulgence I have no need of asking. I know that there are readers enough who will be pleased to follow my brief excursion, because I am myself and will demand no better reason. If I choose to write for them I do no injury to those for whom my personality is an object of indifference."

Physically, Dr. Holmes was not particularly well equipped for eminence. In a letter he speaks of himself as five feet five, "not four, as some have pretended." His face he always considered

“a convenience rather than an ornament.” He spoke of one of his photographs as “very ugly, but horribly true.” He “was not altogether satisfied with what nature had done for him.” One of the depressing experiences of his life was the little ripple of disappointment which his bodily presence created among those who had known him only in his books. He tells with charming frankness of the hotel clerk in Harrisburg who “confided to me with infinite naïveté and ingenuousness that, judging from my personal appearance, he should not have thought me the writer he, in his generosity, reckoned me to be.”

But whatever scanting there was externally there was none within. There was material there for half a dozen ample personalities. The professor, the poet, the theologian, the man of science, the humorist, the table-talker co-existed complete—six persons in one Holmes. He did a solid life’s work as physician and medical professor. His paper on the “Contagiousness of Puerperal Fever” initiated a diminution in the death-rate of young mothers. His name, simply as that of a scientist, has a permanent, if not conspicuous, place in the history of human progress. The wit and the humorist stood upon a solid basis of serious and accurate work. He was trained and accustomed to deal with realities.

The charm of Holmes is in the directness of his perceptions, the dry light of his intelligence, the wholesome spontaneity of all his emotions of mirth, pity or enthusiasm. There was a tranquil unity in his personality. The wonder is in the normal balance of so many faculties ordinarily incompatible. The description that he gave of one of his Parisian teachers may be applied to himself—“Modest in the presence of nature, fearless in the face of authority, unwearying in the pursuit of truth.” He was religious after the type that Professor William James denominates “healthy-minded.” That is, he was naturally on the side of right. He continued throughout his long life to look at things with the innocent directness of a three-year-old child.

Many of his characteristics arose from the extraordinary rapidity of his thought processes. He observed:

“If you ever saw a crow with a king-bird after him you will get an image of a dull speaker and a lively listener. The bird in sable plumage flaps heavily along his straightforward course, while the other sails round him, over him, under him, leaves him, comes back again,

tweaks out a black feather, shoots away once more, never losing sight of him, and finally reaches the crow's perch at the same time the crow does, having cut a perfect labyrinth of loops and knots and spirals, while the slow fowl was painfully working from one end of his straight line to the other."

The king-bird fashion was always Holmes's with other minds, and, singularly enough, also with his own. Around his own main line of thought he always looped his spirals of wit. And is not this the real secret of humor, to be able to carry on two or more lines of thought simultaneously, to see oneself objectively, from all possible points of view, in all lights, against all backgrounds? And here may be an excuse for punning. The speaker is alive to all the overtones of his vocables. Holmes, like Shakespeare, was an incorrigible punster. He said of a certain man, "I think he does not touch the world at a great many points—in which particular he differs from the porcupine." His grandest hymn, praise to God as Ruler of the sun and stars, is entitled "A Sun-Day Hymn." Yet he himself confessed: "A pun is *prima facie* an insult to the person you are talking with. It implies utter indifference to, or sublime contempt for, his remarks, no matter how serious. . . . People who make puns are like wanton boys that put coppers on the railroad tracks. They amuse themselves and other children, but their trick may upset a freight-train of conversation for the sake of a battered witticism." This is by no means a correct account of the Doctor's own punning, because no wit ever derailed his trains of thought or disturbed his fundamental seriousness. The electric flashes around his wheels did not impede their progress. When, in advancing age, his sight began to fail he wrote that one of his eyes had "a cataract in the kitten state of development," he realized and felt all that the anatomist and the poet could know and feel of the fact and its sinister significance.

Wordsworth wrote:

"The child is father of the man;
And I could wish my days to be
Bound each to each by natural piety."

This wish of the Lake poet was the happy fortune of Dr. Holmes. His long life had a singular unity. The very narrowness of its extension geographically gave it intension sentimentally. He grew up to manhood in the house in Cambridge in which he was

born. With the exception of two years and a half, spent in professional study in Paris, his whole life was passed practically within sight of that spot. For an American of his culture he had travelled very little. An interval of fifty years separated his only two visits to Europe. He went through college without leaving home, and later was for thirty-five years a lecturer in the same institution. With natural piety Dr. Holmes idealized the old gambrel-roofed house and every object within and around it. He loved even "the stone with a whitish band" in the pavement of the back yard. He spoke with emotion of the experience of "dying out of a house"—of leaving it forever, as the soul dies out of the body. "So real," he said, "is the life of a house to one who has dwelt in it, more especially the life of the house which held him in dreamy infancy, in restless boyhood, in passionate youth—so real, I say, is its life that it seems as if something like a soul must outlast its perishing frame." It was so with his later houses. "I had no idea," said the professor, "until I pulled up my domestic establishment the other day, what an enormous quantity of roots I had been making during the years I was planted there. Why, there wasn't a nook or a corner that some fibre had not worked its way into." All these objects about which his affections twined we know in detail. They are immortalized in his verse; they are the illustrations of his prose. We know just what was familiar to his eyes when he looked out of his windows—West Boston Bridge and the little barefoot negroes on it, fishing for flounders and catching sculpins; the gulls and the ducks upon the river in wintry weather; and a little further round Bunker Hill Monument.

He loved his ancestry, Dutch, English and American—his grandfathers and his grandmothers. He placed a special value upon his summer home in Pittsfield because it had once been part of the estate of one of his forebears. He loved Colonial history. With his unfailing mixture of reverence and fun, he enjoyed stories of the quaint ways of the Puritans. He loved Cambridge and Harvard University. Above all, he loved Boston—the gilded dome of the State House and the Common. To the former he gave the nickname, "Hub of the Universe," which it will never lose. With him the pleasantry was more than half earnest. He created the character of "Little Boston" in the "Professor at the Breakfast-Table," one of the finest and most

original of his creations, in order that he might without offence pour out through the mouth of the misshapen little dwarf what would otherwise have seemed extravagant praises of the incomparable city.

The average American, torn from his Eastern home before he was old enough for any but the most indistinct memories, passing his boyhood in hired houses in various unlovely towns in the vast, crude West, educated at schools without traditions—this American, living now in still another accidental spot, himself a piece of driftwood on a sand-bar, envies a man like Holmes. Many of us who have not had so much geographical drifting have, however, behind us life-stories made up of chapters as inconsequential as if torn from separate biographies and patched together by some blundering redactor. Many of us have yielded for seasons to the pressure of environment, only to rise later in mental insurrection “envenomed with irrevocable wrong.” Holmes from the start combined loyalty and independence. He loved everything about him, but as an equal sovereign high contracting party also born in the purple. By unquestioned birth-right he unfolded his personality in liberty. As he had never admitted outside domination, so he never had occasion to fling away anything that had once been a part of himself.

With all his enthusiasms, Holmes saw realities in the dry light of truth. He wrote to Mr. George Abbot James:

“How formidable a little cheap knowledge looks to those who are wholly ignorant of its familiar terms. I recollect that the word ‘forwarding’ made almost a sensation, as Sumner spoke it. What is ‘forwarding’? It includes all that part of a bookbinder’s work which is necessary to the preservation of a volume. All the rest is ‘finishing’—coloring the leather, gilding and ornamentation of any kind. When you hear a distinguished personage using long words or technical phrases that frighten you and make you think how learned he is, and how desperately ignorant you and all your acquaintances are, as soon as the speech is over and the company separates go to your dictionary or encyclopædia and look out his polysyllables, and ten to one you will get him off his high horse in five minutes. If he quotes a Latin sentence, see if ‘Bohn’s Hand-Book’ hasn’t got it. If a line of any English poet or prose-writer, look in your ‘Bartlett’s Familiar Quotations.’ This will probably fetch him.”

And with all his broad, human sympathies Holmes was every inch an aristocrat. He was always conscious of belonging to a

superior class. He invented a name for it: "the Brahmin Caste" of New England. By this he meant the people whose ancestors had been college graduates and professional men and social, civil and military local magnates from the seventeenth century down. Sir Walter Scott never dwelt with keener interest on the contrast between the gentleman born and the common man than did Holmes upon the contrast between the young Brahmin from the "mansion house" and the cheaply-gotten-up youth from "the huckleberry districts." This very name, "huckleberry districts," illustrates a talent he had for coining appellations innocent in themselves, based maybe upon some simple and undeniable botanical or geographical fact, but inexplicably and exasperatingly expressive of disparagement. It seems the most natural thing in the world to call institutions of learning that happen to be away from the seaboard "fresh-water colleges." But the term carries with it a connotation of inferiority and stirs resentment. "Mediocrity" is a term that the Doctor often used in a concrete sense to designate a lot of earth-born people, who, stand on tip-toe as long as they might, never could reach up into the intellectual and æsthetic atmosphere of the Brahmins. His own social position was as secure as that of a German who has a "*von*" before his name. He had the comfortable sensation pervading all his veins and capillaries that every fact, historical, geographical, genealogical, religious or educational, leading up to the birth and development of Oliver Wendell Holmes was a fact of distinction. He wrote to Motley:

"My mother used to tell me that her grandfather (Colonel Wendell) lost forty buildings in that fire [of 1760], which always made me feel grand, as being the descendant of one that hath had losses—in fact, makes me feel a little grand now in telling you of it. Most people's grandfathers in Boston, to say nothing of their great-grandfathers, got their living working in their shirt-sleeves, but when a man's g-g. lost forty buildings it is almost up to your sixteen quarterings that you knew so much about in your Austrian experience."

Motley, when American Minister at Vienna, had found that nobody who had less than sixteen quarterings in his coat of arms, indicating so many illustrious marriage alliances of his ancestors, could be received at court.

No college class has ever been immortalized as Holmes immortalized the Harvard class of 1829 by the poems which for

forty successive years he wrote for its class days. The comradeship, the mirth, the tender sentiment and the high aspirations of the American college student find a wonderful expression in this cycle. As, thirty-nine years out of college, the Doctor looks round the table at his classmates, now become famous, he exclaims, pointing to one and another:

“ You’ve won the great world’s envied prize,
And grand you look in people’s eyes,
With HON. and LL.D.
In big brave letters, fair to see,
Your fist, old fellow! off they go!
How are you, Bill? How are you, Joe?”

There is nothing in this sort of stuff to suggest the writer of “The Chambered Nautilus.” That poem was written when the author was, to use his own words, in “the highest state of mental exaltation and the most crystalline clairvoyance, as it seemed to me, that had ever been granted to me—I mean that lucid vision of one’s thought and of all the forms of expression which will be at once precise and musical.”

As a prose-writer Holmes is at his best in his comments upon characters and manners and social life as he saw them around him in New England. His novels, whatever their defects of plot and technical construction, will be read with delight as long as New England is loved. His four volumes of table-talk come very near being novels, since they all contain love-affairs and beautiful portraits of women. His three novels are full of the sparkling sallies that set the table on a roar. The despair, in writing about him, as in writing about Horace, is to know when to stop quoting. “A man’s ignorance,” he said, “is as much his private property and as precious in his own eyes as his family Bible. Ignorance is a solemn and sacred fact and, like infancy, which it resembles, should be respected.” What a vista of experiences is opened by the remark that “Poets who come to recite their verses and reformers who come to explain their projects are among the most formidable of earthly visitations.” What a comfort to the discouraged student it is to come across his frank remark about Emerson’s *Brahma*, “To the average Western mind it is the nearest approach to a Torricellian vacuum of intelligibility that language can pump out of itself.” How often have we verified the memorandum that “a communicative friend is the greatest

nuisance to have at one's side during a railway journey, especially if his conversation is stimulating and in itself agreeable. 'A fast train and a slow neighbor' is my motto."

Holmes's fun is of a high type. He was the son of a Puritan minister. He drew his first breath, and he grew up in a world of purity and moral dignity. His was the inborn refinement of Christianity. In the utter abandon of hilarity it would have been impossible for him to pass into the realm of indelicacy or profanity. He had escaped the narrowness of Puritanism while retaining its elevation. As spontaneous and as fearless as Burns or Byron, he had nothing to say that a maiden might blush to hear. Of his humorous poems "The Deacon's Masterpiece," or "The Wonderful One-Hoss Shay, a Logical Story," is doubtless the funniest:

"Have you heard of the wonderful one-hoss shay,
That was built in such a logical way?
It ran a hundred years to a day,
And then of a sudden, it—ah, but stay,
I'll tell you what happened without delay,
Scaring the parson into fits,
Frightening people out of their wits,—
Have you ever heard of that, I say?"

The first effusion by which, as a college boy, our poet became known to the American public was that patriotic outburst, "Ay, tear her tattered ensign down," which thrilled the national heart and saved the old frigate "Constitution" from being broken up for junk. A natural expectation, after such a beginning, would be to find him pre-eminent among the bards of the Civil War. He was at that time in the heyday of his powers. His son, the present Justice Holmes, was a gallant officer thrice wounded in action. Thus all personal and patriotic emotions combined to inspire him. But, on the whole, his war-time poems are the least characteristic of all that he wrote. He was no Tyrtaeus. The battle-field was not his arena. He had not been identified with either side in the fierce struggle that led up to the war. He did not, like the Abolitionists, see the glory of the Lord in the "trampling out of the grapes of wrath." For the time the great turbid flood of popular passions confused his moods and his vocabulary. "I do believe," he wrote to Motley, "that Hell is empty of Devils for this last year; this planet has been so full of them helping

the secession liars." The utterance is not in the real manner of Holmes, although it contains a Shakespearean allusion; it recalls rather to those of us who are old enough to remember it the kind of eloquence with which Northern regiments were recruited in the early sixties. The delightful Autocrat was eclipsed. But what he said of General Grant is fine: "One of the simplest, stillest men I ever saw. Of all considerable personages I have seen, he appears to me the least capable of an emotion of vanity. I doubt if we have any ideal so completely realized as that of the republican soldier in him. I cannot get over the impression he made on me."

He was no more drawn into the Teetotalism of his times than into the Abolitionism. Residence as a student in France seems to have reinforced in his case the traditions of the older Puritanism in regard to beverages. In a serious passage of the "Autocrat" he said: "I believe in temperance, nay, almost in abstinence, as a rule for healthy people. I trust I practise both." But, just as in reading the life and words of Jesus of Nazareth, we notice the absence of any sense of danger from the seductions of the wine-cup. He seems to have felt that *ex officio*, as a poet he must sing of wine, as he did of love and friendship. One of his poems of the class of '29 begins with the exclamation:

"Flash out a stream of blood-red wine,
For I would drink to other days,
And brighter shall their memory shine,
Seen flaming through its crimson blaze!"

Unexplained allusion was, perhaps, the Doctor's favorite rhetorical embellishment. One characteristic of his mind was the firmness and scientific severity of his thinking. But another characteristic was the rapidity and poetic affluence of his ideas. He was always the professor of anatomy who saw the skeletons of propositions and their exact articulations. But he was just as much the poet whose imagination clothed those skeletons with breathing beauty and the wit who saw their amusing aspects. The extraordinary swiftness of his thoughts demanded an equally extraordinary richness of materials for the simultaneous activity of all the mental powers. Such could be provided by constant allusions—that is, by the suggestion of volumes there was not time to say. As we pass with him down the main corridors of his thought he gives at each step glimpses into side cabinets or out-

of-door vistas through doors only slightly ajar. With a flash he throws the side-light upon the matter in hand. If our minds are alert and nimble enough to take it all in we get the benefit. But, in any case, not a moment's delay is granted, not a syllable of explanation; the Doctor is at once far ahead on the main line.

Some day some one will write a key to Dr. Holmes's allusions. It will cover a good many pages and learning will be required in him who compiles it. Most of us must confess that the Doctor leaves us not infrequently with the foolish vacancy of one who is conscious of having missed a good point that others see and enjoy. Allusion is a compliment to a bright companion and a humiliation to a dull one. "That sounds like a cock-and-bull story," said the young fellow whom they call John. "I abstained," says the Autocrat, "from making Hamlet's remark to Horatio and continued." Alas! for the reader who does not know his Shakespeare and who does not instantly recall, "There are more things in heaven and earth, Horatio, than are dreamt of in your philosophy." But most of us are equal to an allusion like that. Speaking of the incrustation on the door of an old church in England, which microscopical examination proved to be a human skin, and which was probably taken by Saxons off from some Danish pirate and nailed up *in terrorem*, the Autocrat says, "It was a genuine historical document of the Ziska drum-head pattern." If you don't already know the story of the grim old Hussite leader and his dying directions to have a drum made out of his skin that he might still inspire and lead the faithful in battle you will never learn it from Holmes. The professor says, "The great end of being is to harmonize man with the order of things, and the church has been a good pitch-pipe and may be still. But who shall tune the pitch-pipe? *Quis cus*—" Breaking off in the middle of a Latin word, he adds in parenthesis, "On the whole, as the quotation was not entirely new, and, being in a foreign language, might not be familiar to all the boarders, I thought that I would not finish it." The reader who does not happen to remember *Quis custodiet custodes?* and the meaning of that Latin question, "Who shall watch the watchmen?" here loses scent of the game provokingly. "Achilles," says the Poet, "was little better than a Choctaw brave. I won't quote Horace's line which characterizes him so admirably, for I will take it for granted that you all know it."

Dr. Holmes was a profoundly religious man. There is not in all his jests and sarcasms a single irreverent note. But his rejection of his father's theology and of Puritan moods was absolute. The old New England Primer had taught, with the first letter of the alphabet, that, "In Adam's fall we sinned all." To protest against this dogma was the inspiration of a large part of his literary activity. To exhibit how our characters are made for us by pre-natal or other influences for which we cannot be held in any sense responsible is the purpose of his three novels: "Elsie Venner," "The Guardian Angel" and "A Mortal Antipathy." Elsie Venner is a beautiful and gifted girl whose mother was bitten by a rattlesnake a few weeks before Elsie's birth. Thus in her nature were mingled the noble impulses and affections of a woman and the sullenness and sudden murderous malice of the serpent. "Do you want an image of the human will or the self-determining principle, as compared with its prearranged and impassable restrictions?" asks the Autocrat. "A drop of water imprisoned in a crystal; you may see such a one in any mineralogical collection. One little fluid particle in the crystalline prism of the universe!"

Joined with his protest against the doctrine of hereditary sin was his protest against the associated doctrine of eternal misery for a vast portion of mankind. People less than fifty years old to-day cannot realize what it meant to breathe an atmosphere highly charged with those doctrines.

When I was a child in southern Indiana the handful of "New-School" Presbyterians among whom my parents were numbered, being unable to afford an edifice of their own, worshipped in a small building which they rented from the Universalists. This building, familiarly known as "The Little White Church," had been erected by a single citizen of some means for a society so few in numbers and so low in public favor that they could not maintain regular services even after a place had been provided. The audience-room was destitute of architectural beauty, as were all the other churches of that region, except that on the front of the white-painted pulpit there was a circular black medallion bearing in the centre a gilded cross and above it the three golden words "God is Love." Upon that sole object of religious symbolism in the bare room my childish eyes always rested with interest and wonder. It was full of mystery, but also of cheer. But

as, in the course of time, our feeble congregation gathered a little strength and theirs still further dwindled, the ownership of the modest edifice passed from them to us. The only change made was the removal of the medallion with its golden motto from the front of the pulpit. Nothing was ever said about it in my hearing, and I asked no questions, but none the less deep on my childish mind was the impression that God's love was something which people of correct views did not think best to make too prominent. The same sentiment was in the air breathed by the child Oliver Wendell Holmes, and it became one great purpose of his life to affirm the contrary.

"That one undoubted text we read,
All doubt beyond, all fear above,
Nor crackling pile nor cursing creed
Can burn or blot it: *God is Love!*"

This man of jests had a heart of tenderest sensibility. He exclaimed to Mrs. Harriet Beecher Stowe:

"Pity I feel as if that would be all that would be left of me if I live but a few years longer. To you I suppose sin is the mystery—to me suffering is. I trust that Love will prove the solution of both. . . . Educational suffering I can to a certain extent understand. But the great solid mass of daily anguish which the sun looks upon—and looks away from, as if he could not bear it,—antedating man, including everything that has a nerve in it,—that I can do nothing with."

Holmes did not give up any more of his ancestral religion than was necessary to adjust it to his sunny temper, to his kind-heartedness and to his sense of justice. It was characteristic of him to be free, but not radical. Professor Barrett Wendell says that Dr. Holmes remained through life a sound Unitarian. Probably the Doctor himself thought so. But that beautiful hymn of his, which is in all the orthodox hymn-books:

"O Love divine, that stooped to share
Our sharpest pang, our bitterest tear,"

never could have been written by one who was consistently Unitarian in his thinking. The truth is that Dr. Holmes never cared to work out a theological system, but was content to be clear upon the points that seemed to him vital. In general he kept the habits in which he had been brought up. "Would you believe," he wrote to Mrs. Stowe, "that to this day I do not read novels on

Sunday, at least until after sundown?" He went to church regularly without much care as to the theology of the preacher. It was only the general benefit, the cultivation of reverence that he was after. "It does me some kind of good, I think," he said. But he wrote to James Freeman Clarke:

"I think you and I are not ardent admirers of sermons in general. They are last year's bird's-nests for the most part,—dried apples in loaded orchards,—empty phials that sick men have drained and died notwithstanding,—the skins of the wise serpents out of which they have crept, carrying their brains with them. Nothing but a pile of old prescriptions is worse reading."

But he tells Clarke, "Your sermons reach down even below Christianity to that plutonic core of nature over which all revelations must stratify their doctrines."

The most interesting of the characters in which we know Dr. Holmes is that of the man growing old. His life had a long afternoon, or rather, we may say, Indian summer. He was within two years of fifty when James Russell Lowell made it a condition of assuming the editorship of the new magazine—"The Atlantic Monthly"—that Holmes should be the first contributor engaged. And it was the "Autocrat of the Breakfast-Table," the series of papers then written, or, as he himself expressed it, "dipped from the running stream of his thoughts," that first made him known to the wide circle of readers. Already the "Autocrat" (if a German idiom may be permitted) contains the professor's paper on "Old Age." "My friend the professor," said the Autocrat, "began talking with me one day in a dreary sort of way. I couldn't get at the difficulty for a good while, but at last it turned out that somebody had been calling him an old man." But as a result of thinking the matter over and reading Cicero's "*De Senectute*," the professor, who of course was Holmes himself, made up his mind to meet "Old Age" half-way. This paper ended with a quotation from the author's then unpublished poem, "The Old Player":

"Call him not old whose visionary brain
Holds o'er the past its undivided reign.
For him in vain the envious seasons roll
Who bears eternal sunshine in his soul.
If yet the minstrel's song, the poet's lay
Spring with her birds, or children with their play,

Or maiden's smile or heavenly dream of art
 Stir the few life-drops creeping round his heart,—
 Turn to the record where his years are told,—
 Count his gray hairs,—they cannot make him old."

These lines never applied to any one more fitly than to the man who wrote them. Even earlier in the "Autocrat" occurs that delightful poem "The Old Man Dreams."

The surprising thing is that the author of these poems and reflections on old age had still six-and-thirty years of vigor and productivity and fame before him. He was not at all at the point at which Emerson wrote "Terminus." But stranger still it is to go back to "the jocund morning of life" and find that in one of his earliest poems the author said:

"And if I should live to be
 The last leaf upon the tree
 In the spring,
 Let them smile, as I do now,
 At the old forsaken bough
 Where I cling."

That youthful poem showed the two sides of the poet's heart: the sense of humor and the tenderness of sympathy. There was no malice in the fun, but the pathetic aspect of things could not hide from him the comic. No one would take this stanza, if found alone, to be from the humorous poem of a very young man:

"The mossy marbles rest
 On the lips that he has pressed
 In their bloom,
 And the names he loved to hear
 Have been carved for many a year
 On the tomb."

It is a joy to know that the old man lived long enough to taste to the full the happiness of being appreciated. The unreserved and companionable sympathy that he had offered to his fellow men he received at last in equal measure. He had said:

"I confess to a tender feeling for my little brood of thoughts. When they have been welcomed and praised it has pleased me; and if at any time they have been rudely handled and despitely treated, it has cost me a little worry. I don't despise reputation, and I should like to be remembered as having said something worth lasting well enough to last."

Such frankness opened hearts; it disarmed criticism and cemented friendship. In America every day's mail brought more testi-

monials than he could read or answer. When he visited England the universities decorated him with degrees, and society, from the Prince of Wales down, overwhelmed him with attentions.

Was Oliver Wendell Holmes a great man? That is not the common impression. His wit was too nimble. One who can put a girdle round about the world of thought in forty seconds is considered lacking in the necessary ponderosity of greatness. We, his partisans, will always hold it a grievance that he, who to us means so much more than most of the great, should be debarred from the Pantheon. To us who were boys half a century ago in out-of-the-way places—southern Indiana, for instance—Holmes came as the Greek *literati* came to Italy, after the fall of Constantinople, and brought a Renaissance. To us he meant the revelation of a bright and joyous intellectual and social world of which we had not dreamed. With his love for big trees and his enthusiasm for fast horses, his irrepressible puns and jokes, his chuckling merriment and his songs, he brought a new zest to life. He dared to call his soul his own. In him we found scholarship without dullness, piety without austerity, courage without animosity, fun without indelicacy, loyal provincialism without narrowness. In him was presented a natural, spontaneous, broad, manifold, interesting, affectionate life, in an age of sectarianism and conventionality. This was worth more than greatness.

Can we close this appreciation with anything else than those lines which Dr. Holmes loved best of all that he ever composed, and which, when asked for his autograph, he oftenest wrote above it—the last stanza of “The Chambered Nautilus”?

“Build thee more stately mansions, O my soul,
As the swift seasons roll!
Leave thy low-vaulted past!
Let each new temple, nobler than the last,
Shut thee from Heaven with a dome more vast,
Till thou at length art free,
Leaving thine outgrown shell by life’s unresting sea!”

W. G. BALLANTINE.